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ABSTRACT

The ideas of John Dewey illustrate the American conflict between democratic principles and authority. Dewey denied opposition between freedom and authority and suggested that the issue was the union of the two principles. He defined authority as stability of social organization which gives direction and support to individuals. For Dewey, any new system of authority had to be voluntary and cooperative, internal to the individual, and not imposed on him. He suggested that the search for a new kind of authority should be modeled after the field of science. An examination of Dewey's educational philosophy reflects the difficulty of his theory. Dewey rejected both the internalization of moral absolutes and the teaching of automatic subordination to bureaucratic control. The role of the school, however, was to manipulate the child to ensure a uniformity of outlook and a widely accepted authority. The school was to function as an instrument of social change and the teacher as a social engineer. He assumed the superiority of his standards to those of parents. While the sincerity of Dewey's devotion to democracy is obvious, it must be pointed out that while he calls for teacher participation in educational decision making, he does not devote equal time to the public's right to control the schools. In conclusion, despite his efforts to transcend the conflicts of the American tradition, the conflicts were evident in his work. (Author/KC)

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JOHN DEWEY AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY

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It is a commonplace, but nonetheless correct observation, that the questions posed by historians in large measure shape the nature and value of historical writing. One question which would seem to have considerable power to open to investigation the fundamental nature of a society is that of the attitudes to authority held by individuals and groups. "Authority" is here understood in a wide sense, as that which confers legitimacy on the exercise of power, not only in the sphere of politics but in the whole of society. Although such a line of inquiry promises to be fruitful, and has indeed been explored by historians of both Europe and Colonial America, it is one which has had little appeal for students of the modern United States. (However, I should mention the excellent recent article by John P. Diggins, "The Socialization of Authority and the Dilemmas of American Liberalism".[1] My own approach is somewhat different, but I am convinced that Diggins has correctly identified a number of issues.)

Why the topic has been so neglected is outside the scope of this paper, but whatever the reasons it means that the tensions and ambiguities which surround the subject have remained largely unexplored. Somewhat more attention has been paid to the related topic of leadership, but even here the focus has been on style and technique, rather than on the fundamental issue of what <u>legitimates</u> leadership.

It is impossible here to provide even a capsule account of the development of conflicting American attitudes to authority and leadership. Suffice to say that by the end of the nineteenth century several competing traditions could be found. One was profoundly antinomian and suspicious of any claim to authority superior to the individual, while on the other hand Americans also exhibited the willingness, which Tocqueville had noted, to conform slavishly to an authority which emanated directly from the people. While Americans frequently manifested a desire for powerful, authoritative leadership, they could also be hostile to any hint of a non-egalitarian, non-democratic assertion of power. To this traditional dichotomy the reformers of the Progressive Era added a new element. As an alternative to democratic politicians who acted as a "voice of the people" and the genteel reformer who assumed a leadership role for "the best men" the progressives proposed the expert, the man who lead not by virtue of either majority rule or class position, but who rested on the authority of science.[2]

This view of twentieth century liberalism is obviously not novel. However, a close examination of the treatment of authority, and the related subject of leadership, by one of the most influential thinkers of modern America may prove useful on several counts. John Dewey recognized clearly that the problem of authority was crucial to any social theory. His discussion of it, and the solutions he proposed are of considerable interest

not only for the light they throw on his own ideas about man and society, but also because they make clear some of the complexities and quandries concealed in the apparently innocent and straightforward proposals of progressive thinkers. While Dewey consciously sought to overcome the dualism and tensions about authority which had previously characterized American thought, his own formula was ultimately unsatisfactory, and his own work manifested the contradictions whose roots lay buried in the American past.

For many years the popular perception of Dewey tended to be a caricature, in which his concern for democracy and his belief that it should permeate the educational process was seen as as attack on all adult authority in the schools, and as an apology for mindless permissiveness. More recently this picture has been substantially revised by historians of education, and Dewey and other progressive educators are now accused of sacrificing democracy to social control and manipulation.[3] In the discussion which follows it should become clear that Dewey was indeed interested in the use of the school for social control, and was far from rejecting either authority or leadership; however, his beliefs on these subjects were more ambiguous and complex than is sometimes indicated by his critics. Dewey felt keenly the characteristic American tension between democracy and the desire for powerful and innovative leadership. Indeed his intellectual career can be seen in large measure as an attempt to transcend the tension by creating new definitions of authority and leadership.

His efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, and the contradictions which he had sought to overcome can be found in his own work.

Dewey's most explicit discussion of the issue was produced quite late in his career, in 1936, when he was seventy-seven years old. Nonetheless it is consistent with his earlier writings and may be taken as a guide to his thinking. In an article entitled "Authority and Resistance to Social Change" he denied any opposition between freedom and authority, arguing that "the issue that requires constant attention is the intimate and organic union of the two things...." Authority was defined as "stability of social organization by means of which direction and support are given to individuals; while individual freedom stands for the forces by which change is intentionally brought about." The apparent antagonism between the two principles had arisen when authority was invested in certain traditional institutions, such as the church. When these institutions came under attack they claimed that the attack was on the principle of authority itself. Their opponents accepted the claim at face value, and preached the total liberation of the individual from all restraint.[4]

This historic struggle led to the widespread acceptance of the appealing but false belief that politics necessarily saw a constant battle between the rival spheres of freedom and authority. In fact the conflict was at its root two-fold. For one thing, it was a struggle <u>within</u> people between the conservative factors in personality and "the liberating, the variable and innovating factors." It was

also a conflict between groups of individuals - those who enjoyed power, and those who sought it. While these tensions were inevitable, the tendency to see them as manifesting a necessary antagonism between freedom and authority turns the latter into a "purely restrictive power" and leaves "the exercise of freedom without direction."[5]

Dewey was sharply critical of the attempt to identify "the structure of the individual simply with the elements...that make for variation." The conservative tendencies are just as real, and are even stronger. So much is this so that attacks on the institutions which embody custom and tradition are "deeply resented" by the individual "as an attack upon what is deepest and truest in himself." It was easy therefore, for men to assume that authority existed by nature, and to locate its origin in God. Only in recent times, and as a result of unusual social events, has the identification between the individual and forces of variation and change been made. These social changes have had two significant effects. For one thing, the institutions which had exercised authority and which came under attack were shown to be "external and oppressive with respect to the new forces." While it was necessary for these barriers to progress to be discredited, the assualt on them had the unfortunate effect of seeming to destroy the very principle of authority itself, and thus deprived "individuals of the direction and support that are universally indispensable both for the organic freedom of individuals and for social stability." [6]

One consequence of these events was the emergence of the creed of laissez-faire, which did not in fact result in the

abolition of authority, but rather led to its concentration in the hands of a few economically powerful individuals not responsible fo the rest of the community:

> While decrying the principle of authority, and asserting the necessity of limiting the exercise of authority to the minimum needed for maintenance of police order, the new philosophy in fact erected the wants and endeavors of private individuals seeking personal gain to the place of supreme authority in social life. 7

The answer to this problem could not be the simple reassertion of older forms of authority, located in institutions external to the individual. Their limitations had been made clear by the individualistic revolt of modern times. Was it possible to bring about an "organic union of freedom and authority"? The historical record made it seem unlikely. Nor did the present offer much cheer, since it presented the spectacle of dictatorships arising to fill the vacuum of authority left by the triumph of economic individualism.

Dewey made it clear that in raising the problem he was not pleading for "social control by means of a collective planned economy." That would simply represent a return to an external form of authority, ultimately susceptible to attack as other external forms had been. Any new system of authority had to be cooperative and voluntary, internal to individuals, not imposed on them. It would have to arise from the voluntary and reasoned action of people themselves - in short it would have to be a democratic authority. It could not represent personal caprice, but

would have to command respect by its clearly rational nature. The model Dewey chose for this new type of authority was science:

> The resource that has not yet been tried on any large scale in the broad field of human, social relationships is the utilization of organized intelligence, we have substantial evidence in the narrower field of science. Within a limited area, the collective intelligence which is exemplified in the growth and application of scientific method has already become authoritative. 8

He admitted that this was not a fully worked out answer, but was rather a suggestion about the direction the search should take:

> The thesis that the operation of cooperative intelligence as displayed in science is a working model of the union of freedom and authority does not slight the fact that the method has operated up to the present in a limited and relatively technical area. 9

This then was Dewey's attempt to resolve the tension in the American tradition; by denying that there was any necessary tension and by proposing a model of authority which while authoritative, was also rational, collective, progressive and democratic. He had not, of course, solved the problem, but had only suggested that it could be solved, and that a particular line of approach was the most promising.

In a book review published the same year, he returned to some of these problems. Discussing Bertrand Russell's Religion and Science he reasserted the need for some form of authority, and

again posed "the question of whether and how scientific method ...can provide the authority that earlier centuries sought in fixed dogmas." He was troubled by the fact that the contemporary world seemed to manifest a declining rather than a growing faith "in the method of free, experimental inquiry." In large measure this is because, he asserts, it was scientific technique, with its technical triumphs, which was winning the mind of the public, not the scientific spirit, with its cautious and undogmatic temperament. Hence the rise of the philosophies of fascism and communism, and although neither is likely to triumph in America, there is danger that some sort of appeal to "external and dogmatic authority to bring seeming order out of chaos" will will be made. Significantly, when he discusses those most likely to impose this authority he refers to "groups of 'intellectuals' who are fostering the external authoritarian doctrine and who are ready to become the official philosophers of the movement". [10]

To reaffirm the possibility of creating an authority based on shared understanding, he found it necessary to attack Russell's belief in the privacy of perception and the subjectivity of values. Rather he insisted on the possibility of a science of human nature, just as there was a science of physical nature, which would develop "techniques for dealing with human nature." He hastened to add that they "would not consist in manipulation from without because they would demand cooperative voluntary responses for their realization." While asserting the possibility of such a science, he acknowledged that it was far from realization. [11]

The approach to authority which Dewey sketched out here is consistent with that implicit in his earler writings on education. Before we turn to those writings, and assess the degree to which they manifest stresses and contradictions in Dewey's thought, we should note several features of his mature theory of authority. The events of the 1930's had clearly stripped away the optimism of his earlier years, and had revealed the immense difficulties on the road to general acceptance of this new conception of authority. More than that, however, it was now clear that Dewey was not in fact offering a solution to the problem, but rather, he confined himself to pointing out the direction in which he thought the solution lay, if it existed at all. In the last analysis his resolution of the conflicts surrounding the idea of authority is so hopelessly vague as to amount to the statement - offered without proof - that the problem could be dealt with. If the greatest philosopher of American liberalism could do no better than this, there is some reason to question the adequacy of the response offered by that tradition as a whole. A look at Dewey's philosophy of education will make clear that difficulties existed not only in his general theory, but also in this more limited area.

If the only effective authority was voluntary and co-operative, then education must prepare children for it:

> ...the primary business of school is to train children in co-operative and mutually helpful living: to foster in them the consciousness of mutual interdependence....12

Education had to be social, for truth was not an absolute which could be pursued in solitude. Rather, it was a social product:

> As a matter of fact every individual has grown up, and always must grow up, in a social medium. His responses grow intelligent, or gain meaning, simply because he lives and acts in a medium of accepted meanings and values. Through social intercourse, through sharing in the activities embodying beliefs, he gradually acquires a mind of his own. The conception of mind as a purely isolated possession of the self is at the very antipodes of the truth. 13

Despite his stress on the group, rather than the individual, Dewey was prepared to defend individuality and variety. The grounds on which he did so are rather interesting:

> The intellectual variations of the individual in observation, imagination, judgment, and invention are simply the agencies of social progress....14

> A progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them the means of its own growth....15

In short, the individual <u>per se</u>, was not the measure of the worth of individuality. It was the individual as a group contributor. Though he rejected, as we have seen, the imposition of external authority, he did insist on the need to create internal social controls. These controls were not conceived of as merely negative restrictions on individual self assertion, but rather as guides, by which the energies of the individual could be harnessed for soically constructive purposes. These controls, moreover, were to be voluntary, in the sense that they were not to be felt as impositions, external to the person. They were to be part of the person, to be his framework of

ideas, and his method of interpreting the world.

> This common understanding of the means and ends of action is the essence of social control. It is indirect, or emotional and intellectual, not direct or personal. Moreover it is intrinsic to the disposition of the person, not external and coercive. To achieve this internal control through identity of interest and understanding is the business of education. 16

The contrast between the consequences of Dewwy's theory of authority, and those of traditional educators is clear. Dewey rejected both the internalization of moral absolutes, and the teaching of automatic subordination to bureaucratic control. He insisted rather on subordination to the authority of society' common understandings. The individual could contribute to, and participate in, those understandings; in fact his individuality was valuable insofar as it permitted him to do so.

Dewey's emphasis on the uncoerced character of social control should not lead to the assumption that children spontaneously created these controls. On the contrary, to ensure a uniformity of outlook, and hence a widely accepted authority, the school must consciously manipulate the child's environment and use his interests and drives as levers to move him in a desirable direction. Adult authority did not disappear in Dewey's concept of education. It simply became more sublte, less oppressive and, he assumed, more effective.

> It is certainly as futile to expect a child to evolve a universe out of his own mind as it is for a philosopher to attempt that task. Development does not mean just getting some-

> thing out of the mind. It is a development of experience and into experience that is really wanted. And this is impossible save as just that educative medium is provided which will enable the powers and interests that have been selected as valuable to function. (italics mine) 17

As he put it later in the same work, the educator should "determine the environment of the child, and thus by indirection to direct." (italics Dewey's) 18

Dewey never conceived of the child as wholly plastic, subject to endless manipulation by the teacher. The educator was to guide and encourage the natural growth of the child's interests and capacities. As he put it, education was "freeing the life-process for its own most adequate fulfilment." [19] Dewey's heavy reliance on the idea of "growth" has been criticized for its ambiguity,[20] but it should be noticed that it was a very useful device for combining the need for external manipulation with respect for individual character. On balance, however, it is clear that Dewey championed the right of society to guide the individual. Natural growth was not enough:

> As matter of fact, the native activities develop, in contrast with random and capricious exercise, through the uses to which they are put. And the office of the social medium is as we have seen, to direct the growth through putting powers to the best possible use....The natural or native powers furnish the initiating and limiting forces in all education; they do not furnish its ends or aims. 21

Though the child was manipulated, he was not manipulated to make him subordinate or unthinking. Dewey specifically rejected a social control which sought to protect an undemocratic society:

> It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them. 22

The fundamental connection between an education which created in the child a common perception of the world, and democracy, was set forth in the remark that;

> A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder. 23

The assertion of the teacher's leadership in guiding the child was thus perceived as essential to democracy, rather than as hostile to it. Thus Dewey could claim that there was no clash: that just as freedom and authority were complementary, so was the teacher's leadership and democracy. The resolution of the conflict was, however, more illusory than real.

This becomes apparent when we look at the social role Dewey expected the school to play. He did not see the school simply as a means of perpatuating the existing social order. The school was rather to function as an instrument of social change, and the teacher as a social engineer. The goal was to be a more democratic society, but Dewey envisioned manipulating society in this direction. He never dealt with the problem of reconciling these democratic aspirations with the elitist and undemocratic means he proposed using to achieve them.

Dewey recognized that the school could not, by itself, transform society. It could make a significant contribution however, and he was eager to use the potential it did possess. As he put it in his Democracy and Education:

> ...it is the business of the school environment to eliminate, so far as possible, the unworthy features of the existing environment....As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing arrangements, but only such as make for a better future society. The school is its chief agency for the accomplishment of this end. 24

For example, the kindergarten could wean children away from bad home influences and instill proper standards of conduct:

> They will forget to imitate the loud and coarse things they see at home, their attention will be centered on problems which were designed by the school to teach better aims and methods. 25

Dewey might well have been right in making this assertion. It should be noticed however that he was assuming the superiority of his standards to those of the parents, and was also assuming that it was proper to use the school to make the children reflect Dewey rather than the partents. In other words the school was an instrument of social control, in the hands of an elite of social engineers. Again, all this might be desirable, but it could scarcely be described as democratic.

Dewey's defenders might well argue that to dwell on the manipulative and undemocratic implications of his thought is unfair; that the whole context is democratic, that his essential

drive is toward a free and equal society. There is a considerable measure of truth in these rejoinders, and this illustrates clearly how Dewey, despite his best efforts, finally manifested the characteristic American tension between leadership and democracy.

Proof of Dewey's genuine concern for democracy is not hard to find. He was clearly more democratic than many of his contemporaries in his attitudes to vocational education. Where the educational establishment had come to an often overt acceptance of the class nature of vocational education, Dewey clearly rejected any scheme of education which gave some members, of society a purely manual skill. He linked his rejection of a narrow vocational education with a call for a democratic renewal of society:

> Any scheme for vocational education which takes its point of departure from the industrial regime that now exists, is likely to assume and perpetuate its divisions and weaknesses, and thus to become an instrument in accomplishing the feudal dogma of social predestination. 26

Education should seek to develop not only skills, but also a broad comprehension of social and industrial processes. If the workingman was given a skill only, and not a broader view, he would not be a full or effective participant in democratic society:

> ...an education which acknowledges the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation would include instruction in the historic background of present conditions; training in science to give intelligence and initiative

> in dealing with material and agencies of production; and study of economics, civics, and politics, to bring the future worker into touch with the problems of the day and the various methods proposed for its improvement. 27

The same democratic viewpoint emerges clearly in his discussion of school administration. He argued that,

> The keynote of democracy as a way of life may be expressed, it seems to me as the necessity for the participation of every mature being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together. 28

He went on to say that "the democratic principle requires that every teacher should have some organic way in which he can, directly or through representative democratically chosen, participate in the formation of the controlling aims, methods and materials of the school of which he is a part. 29

Given the obvious sincerity of Dewey's professions of devotion to democracy, it is perhaps ungenerous to point out that even here some quite different implications can be found. Consider first his plea for teacher participation in the formation of school policy. It is indeed democratic - for teachers. He does not, however, devote equal attention inthe same article, entitled "Democracy and Educational Administration" to the lay public's right to control the schools. Rather, the impression is reinforced that Dewey saw the teacher as a social engineer was very plainly expressed by Dewey in his remark that,

> In the mechanical arts, the sciences become methods of managing things so as to utilize their energies for recognized aims. By the educative arts philosophy may generate

> methods of utilizing the energies of human beings in accord with serious and thoughtful conceptions of life. Education is the laboratory in which philosophic distinctions become concrete and are tested. 30

It is possible to argue that Dewey's general call for a democratic reconstruction of society was, as Clarence J. Karier has suggested, "ambiguous" and "inadequate".[31] He claims that,

> Dewey's conception of Democracy and Education bypassed the politically potent power questions and instead moved toward a cultural participatory perspective that assumed an increasing acceptance on the part of the masses of the scientific method as the "key to social betterment". Cultural participation, however, was no substitute for political and economic power. 32

Weight is added to Karier's charge when we consider Dewey's remark that,

> The world in which most of us live is a world in which everyone has a calling and occupation, something to do. Some are managers and others are subordinates. But the great thing for one as for the other is that each shall have had the education which enables him to see within his daily work all there is in it of large and human significance. (italics mine) 33

In Dewey's world then, leadership and authority had not disappeared despite his efforts to transcent the conflicts of the American tradition, the conflicts were still very evident in his work.

NOTES

1) Social Research, Vol 46, No.3 (Autumn 1979) pp 454-486
2) A fuller treatment of these issues can be found in Keith Cassidy "American Concepts of Leadership and Authority in the Progressive Era" Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1974.
3) See for example Walter Feinberg, "Progressive Education and Social Planning", Teachers College Record, 73(May 1972) pp 486-505 and Clarence J. Karier, "Liberalism and the Quest for Orderly Change", History of Education Quarterly, Vol 12(Spring 1972) p. 70. A number of articles critical of the Feinberg and Karier approach appeared in the History of Education Quarterly in the Spring of 1975. Replies by Feinberg and Karier appeared in the Winter 1975 edition of the same journal.
4) First published in School and Society, No. 1137 .936, reprinted in John Dewey, Problems of Men, New York: The Philosophical Library, 1946, p.94.
5) Ibid.,p.96.
6) Ibid.,p.97, 100.
7) Ibid.,p.100.
8) Ibid.,p.105.
9) Ibid.,p.107.
10) John Dewey, "Religion, Science and Philosophy" in The Southern Review, 1937, reprinted in John Dewey, Problems of Men, New York: The Philosophical Library 1946, p.169, 171, 176.
11) Ibid.,p.179.
12) John Dewey, The School and Society, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956 (first published 1900; revised edition 1915), p.117
13) John Dewey, Democracy and Education, New York: The Free Press, 1966 (first published 1916), p.295
14) Ibid., p.297
15) Ibid., p.305
16) Ibid.,pp.39-40; see also p.301, where he says "When learning is a phase of active undertakings which involve mutual exchange, social control enters into the very process of learning."
17) John Dewey, The Child and the Curriculum, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956 (first published 1902), p.18.
18) Ibid., p.31
19) Ibid., p.17
20) Richard Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism In American Life, New York: Vintage Books, 1966(first published 1963),p.372-377.
21) John Dewey, Democracy and Education, p.114
22) Ibid., pp.119-120.
23) Ibid., p.99

24) Ibid., p.20.
25). John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, Schools of Tomorrow, New York: E.P. Dutton Co. Ltd., 1962 (first published 1915), p.81.
26) John Dewey, Democracy and Education, p. 318
27) Loc. cit.
28) John Dewey, "Democracy and Educational Administration", in Problems of Men, p.58.
29) Ibid., p.63.
30) John Dewey, Democracy and Education, p. 329.
31) Clarence J. Karier, "Liberalism and the Quest for Orderly Change", History of Education Quarterly, Vol. 12 (Spring 1972), p.70.
32) Ibid., p.76
33) John Dewey, The School and Society, pp. 23-24.